

Epilogue

The period 1975–90 was indeed a formative and unique period in Australian Himalayan climbing. Chapter 29 looked forward from 1990 and foreshadowed some significant shifts in the nature of mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia that would mark 1990 as a turning point. Now, 20 years later, many of those projections of change have developed into well-established trends.

Perhaps the most dominant of all the trends has been the move to commercial expeditions. In the 1970s and 1980s, most Himalayan expeditions were largely do-it-yourself affairs—from initial planning, obtaining a permit and organising the equipment to planning the logistics and arranging the transport from Australia. And all of this time-consuming work was expended before the team even reached Asia and began the walk into the hills to eventually tackle the mountain.

From the last decade of the twentieth century there has been a pronounced shift to commercial expeditions. For example, in a survey of Australian Himalayan mountaineering for the period 2001–03, nearly half of the expeditions covered (16 of 33) were commercial.¹ The trend is probably due to the rising wealth in general of Australians coupled with the increasing time constraints as contemporary society becomes faster paced, allowing less time for planning and organisation. In addition, the Himalayan region has become more accessible and the number of commercial operators in the big mountains has grown sharply.

Two contrasting styles of commercial expedition are important to distinguish. At one extreme lies the fully guided expedition, in which the client is completely taken care of—from armchair to summit. The service provided by the expedition company stretches from all of the preparation, logistics and support to professional mountain guiding to the top of the peak. This allows fit people with little or no mountaineering experience to ascend some of the highest summits in the Himalaya.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all specific information on mountaineers and their climbs included in the epilogue was obtained from the two surveys of Australian Himalayan mountaineering by Zac Zaharias, covering the period 1994–2003: Zaharias, Z. 2001, 'High achievers: Australian Himalayan mountaineering since 1994', *Wild*, no. 80 (Autumn), pp. 30–5; Zaharias, Z. 2004, 'Top of the world: Australian Himalayan climbing 2001–2003', *Wild*, no. 80 (Autumn), pp. 40–7.

For busy people, this type of expedition is very attractive, as they can jump over the long apprenticeship in New Zealand and other alpine areas, which 20–30 years ago was a prerequisite for climbing in the Himalaya.

Even fully guided expeditions, however, are not without risk. The extreme altitude and fickle weather in the Himalaya remain serious risks despite the best preparations and most advanced support that commercial expeditions can provide. The 1996 debacle on Everest showed that even the world's most experienced mountaineers could not guarantee a safe passage to the summits of the Himalayan giants. The highly publicised tragedy took eight lives, including those of the two expedition leaders, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer.

The second style of commercial expedition is much closer to the earlier do-it-yourself approach. In this style, the company organises the peak permit and provides logistical support, but climbers are fully responsible for all aspects of ascending the mountain above base camp. They must take full responsibility for equipment and logistics, do all of the lead climbing and, critically, make all the decisions and judgments along the way that could mean the difference between success and failure, life and death.

Another trend begun about 1990 was the broadening of climbing objectives from Everest and other well-known mountains to some of the lesser-known peaks in the great ranges of Asia. By 1990, Australians had climbed only half of the world's 8000 m mountains, but that would change rapidly in the last decade of the twentieth century. By the end of 1999, Australian climbers had ascended five of the remaining seven 8000 m summits: Makalu (8481 m), Lhotse (8511 m), Dhaulagiri (8167 m), Gasherbrum I (8068 m) and Nanga Parbat (8125 m).²

One projection, though, has not materialised. The focus on Everest has not waned with the first Australian ascent in 1984 and the success of the 1988 bicentennial Everest expedition. On the contrary, Everest has become a stronger magnet than ever. For example, there were 10 Australian attempts on Mt Everest during the period 1994–2000 (of a total of 57 trips, 30 of which were to 8000 m peaks),³ but that ratio increased dramatically in the next three years. Of the 33 expeditions involving Australians in the period 2001–03, 24 were to 8000 m peaks and, of these, 11 were to Everest. In the pre-monsoon period of 2001, four separate expeditions involving Australian climbers were simultaneously on the mountain.⁴

Several of the strands of Australian Himalayan mountaineering covered in the book were continued or reached their conclusion after 1990—many of them connected with Mt Everest. In May 1993, Brigitte Muir (Chapter 28) became the first Australian woman to reach the summit of Everest and, with Jon Muir having climbed the

2 Zaharias, 'High achievers: Australian Himalayan mountaineering since 1994'.

3 Ibid.

4 Zaharias, 'Top of the world: Australian Himalayan climbing 2001–2003'.

mountain in 1998 (Chapter 22), they became the first Australian husband-and-wife team to reach the top of the world. Brigitte Muir was also on Everest in May 1996 at the time of the tragedy involving the Hall and Fischer commercial expeditions; she helped Hall's client Beck Weathers, who barely survived the ordeal, on his descent from the South Col.

A year earlier, Greg Child, one of Australia's most skilled all-round climbers (Chapters 24 and 25), made a successful ascent of Mt Everest via the North Ridge, adding Everest to his very impressive list of accomplishments on mountains around the world. Mike Rheinberger (Chapters 15, 17 and 22) finally realised his dream of standing on top of Everest with an ascent in 1994, but then deteriorated rapidly on the descent and tragically perished from cerebral oedema high on the North Ridge. Greg Mortimer, who along with Tim Macartney-Snape made the first Australian ascent of Everest (Chapter 12), returned to the high Himalaya in 2002 and led a successful expedition to Manaslu (8156 m), reaching the summit himself.

Mike Groom (Chapter 26) continued his remarkable achievements on the very highest of summits into the 1990s with ascents of Mt Everest (8850 m) in 1993, K2 (8611 m) in 1994, Lhotse (8515 m) in 1995 and Makalu (8481 m) in 1999. When he succeeded on K2 in 1994, he became the first Australian to climb the world's three highest mountains (Everest, K2 and Kangchenjunga) and only the eighth climber in the world to do so. With his ascent of Makalu in 1999, Groom became the first Australian to climb the world's six highest peaks.

As one of the major driving forces for Australian Himalayan climbing in the period 1975–90, the Army Alpine Association (AAA) (Chapter 13) has continued a high level of activity into the new millennium. The AAA organised 12 expeditions from 1990 to 2001, with a very high success rate; 10 of the expeditions have placed at least one climber on the summit.⁵ The objectives have spanned a wide range—from the technically challenging trekking peak of Kusum Kanguru to six attempts on 8000 m giants such as Shisha Pangma, Dhaulagiri I and Cho Oyu.

The most well known of the AAA trips was the 2001 Centenary of Federation expedition to the North Ridge of Mt Everest that gained national media attention. The expedition placed three members on the summit on 25 May but the expedition was marred by the tragic deaths in a massive avalanche of the expedition's cameraman and his family while on an acclimatisation trek in Nepal. The expedition was further embroiled in tragedy when Mark Auricht, a team member of the South Australian Everest Expedition, died in Zac Zaharias and Tim Robathan's tent from cerebral oedema. On return to Australia, a 12-month board of inquiry was held by the army to investigate the deaths. Although the inquiry made recommendations supporting the

5 Z. Zaharias, Personal communication.

continuation of mountaineering, the AAA has not subsequently been permitted to mount overseas expeditions. Thus came an abrupt end to a proud and distinguished quarter-century of arguably Australia's most successful mountaineering club.

The period since 1990 has also seen the development of a large number of outstanding new Australian high-altitude climbers. Although much of the action has occurred on the 8000-ers with the major focus remaining on Everest, a few climbers have bucked the dominant trends and ventured out to tackle other mountains and more varied climbing challenges.

Perhaps the most notable of these is Andrew Lindblade, who, with his New Zealand climbing partner, Athol Whimp, has taken on some technically demanding routes on very remote mountains. In 1996, they attempted the unclimbed North Face of Thalay Sagar (6904 m) in the Indian Himalaya, and returned the next year to complete the route successfully—the first ascent after 10 unsuccessful attempts by a variety of expeditions. The pair followed this success with an ascent in 2000 of the North Face of Jannu (7710 m), the imposing 'Wall of Shadows' (Chapter 3). Even more audacious was their alpine-style attempt on the sweeping West Face of Gasherbrum IV (7925 m; see Chapter 25); they reached the halfway point on the face before being forced to retreat. Lindblade and Whimp have done all of their Himalayan climbing in do-it-yourself style, avoiding the stampede towards commercial expeditions.

Somewhat in the style of Lindblade and Whimp, Duncan Chessell has tackled a range of Himalayan peaks, from popular summits such as Ama Dablam (6854 m) to very challenging trekking peaks such as Kusum Kanguru (6369 m) and the lesser-known Labchi Kang (7367 m). Along the way, he has also ascended two of the world's 8000 m peaks: Everest twice (2001 and 2006) and Cho Oyu.

Brian Laursen has moved up through the AAA system to become one of Australia's leading Himalayan climbers in his own right. With his ascent in 2002 of Manaslu (8156 m), he had climbed four of the world's 8000 m peaks. Other successful ascents were of Shisha Pangma Central (8024 m), Cho Oyu (8201 m) and Everest (8850 m) during the period 1997–2001.

As noted in Chapter 28, Australian women were somewhat of a novelty in Himalayan mountaineering in the period before 1990. This, too, began to change. Australian women became more numerous in the great ranges of Asia and attacked the full range of Himalayan mountaineering objectives—from precipitous rock spires to the 8000 m giants. As an example of the former, Vera Wong has made several expeditions to the rock towers of the western Himalaya, making the first ascent of Tenan Tower (5300 m) in Pakistan in 1995, followed three years later with ascents of the rarely climbed Changi Tower (5820 m) and Marpo Brakk (5400 m), also in Pakistan.

Sue Fear emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century as Australia's most accomplished female Himalayan climber ever. Beginning with an ascent in 1997 of Makalu II (7680 m) in the Khumbu region of Nepal, she went on to climb five 8000 m peaks in the next nine years: Cho Oyu (8201 m), Shisha Pangma Central (8024 m), Everest (8850 m) and Gasherbrum II (8035 m). With her ascent of Everest in 2003, Fear became the second Australian woman, after Brigitte Muir, to climb the world's highest mountain. Tragically, Fear died in 2006 in a crevasse fall during the descent from Manaslu (8156 m) after having reached the summit.

Of all Australian Himalayan climbers in the period since 1990, undoubtedly the most successful is Andrew Lock. By 2008, he had climbed 13 of the world's 14 8000 m summits, including Mt Everest; in October 2009, Lock summited on Shishapangma (8027 m) and joined the elite club of mountaineers who had summited all of the world's highest mountains. He is the first Australian to achieve this remarkable feat.⁶

Lock began his assault in 1993 with an ascent of K2—arguably the hardest of the 8000-ers considering its altitude and technical difficulty. In 1997, he climbed Dhaulagiri (8167 m) and Broad Peak (8047 m), becoming the first Australian to climb two 8000 m mountains in the same year. He repeated the feat in 2002 with ascents of Manaslu (8156 m) and Lhotse (8511 m), and in 1999, he reached the summits of Gasherbrum I (8068 m) and II (8035 m) on the same trip. Three of his ascents—Nanga Parbat (8125 m), Annapurna (8091 m) and Gasherbrum I—were first Australian ascents.

Even more impressive is the style of Lock's climbs. He has adopted a bold approach, climbing either alone or in small groups, which emphasises skill, stamina and judgment more than logistical backup. His ascent of Broad Peak in 1997 was typical of his bold approach, with a completely solo climb from base camp to the top and a very high bivvy just under the summit. Lock also has the judgment, however, to pull back when conditions are not right, having retreated from just below the summit of Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain.

Building on the increasing experience of Australians in the great ranges of Asia, more and more Australians are becoming guides on commercial expeditions. Mike Groom was one of the first and his strength and composure on the ill-fated 1996 commercial expeditions to Everest prevented an even worse disaster. Groom was the only surviving guide from the Rob Hall-led expedition; his tireless efforts along the descent route and at the South Col provided some much needed organisation to a rapidly deteriorating, chaotic situation.⁷ Other Australian mountaineers who have guided on commercial expeditions include Andrew Lock and Duncan Chessell.

⁶ Groom, M. 1997, *Sheer Will*, Random House Australia, Milsons Point.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The last word

This book has focused on the years from 1975 to 1990 as the formative period in Australian Himalayan climbing, highlighting two major strands that led to the first Australian ascents of Mt Everest. One of these was centred on the ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC), which mounted the first major Australian expedition to the Himalaya in 1978 (Chapters 6 and 7). The ascent of Dunagiri by Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall of the ANUMC team was the first 7000 m success by an Australian expedition and propelled the Macartney-Snape–Hall team towards eventual success on Mt Everest in 1984—the first Australian ascent (by Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer; see Chapters 11 and 12).

The second strand centred on the AAA, which had its origins in Canberra about the same time (Chapter 13). From the late 1970s, the AAA steadily amassed a wealth of climbing experience in the great ranges of Asia and built a large cadre of skilled Himalayan climbers. The AAA was a significant driving force behind the 1988 Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE), which achieved the second Australian ascent of the world's highest peak. The final push to the top was a remarkable, nerve-racking fight against high-altitude deterioration and exhaustion by Pat Cullinan and Paul Bayne (Chapter 22).

The lineage of these original two strands of Australian Himalayan mountaineering continues well into the new millennium. In 2006, Lincoln Hall got his second chance at Mt Everest, 22 years after he played an integral part in the first successful ascent. In 1984, poised to go for the summit from the high camp at the top of the Great Couloir on the North Face of Everest, Hall pulled back on the summit day as Macartney-Snape, Mortimer and Andy Henderson continued towards the top. Showing a considerable amount of judgment, Hall had hot tea waiting for the exhausted trio at top camp when they returned and assisted Mortimer on the descent. His own chance to summit Everest had seemingly passed.

In 2006, Lincoln Hall was again on the north side of Everest, ascending towards the top via the North Ridge. This time he was moving well on the upper reaches of the mountain and reached the summit, closing the circle that had begun with the ANUMC's first aspirations for Everest after the Dunagiri success. As is always the case on big mountains, however, reaching the summit is only half of the climb—often the easier half. Hall's descent of Everest turned into an epic of monumental proportions, achieving headlines in newspapers around the world.

Not far below the summit, Hall began to succumb to altitude sickness, probably cerebral oedema. He deteriorated rapidly and moving soon became difficult. Despite heroic efforts by expedition staff to assist him down, he was eventually left to die high on Everest. Without a sleeping-bag out in the open on the mountain, he was

passed in the pre-dawn hours by ascending climbers who assumed he was dead. Reports of his death were dispatched from the expedition base camp and travelled around the world, quickly reaching his family and friends in Australia.

As dawn arrived, Hall almost literally returned to life from an apparent state of death. Surprised to see him alive and able to move and talk, a passing climbing team rendered assistance and, accompanied by members of his expedition's staff, Hall eventually descended and began the long recovery from his ordeal. The account by Hall in his book *Dead Lucky* of his night on the mountain suspended between life and death has become an instant classic in the mountaineering literature.

If Hall has achieved worldwide fame for defying death high on Everest, Zac Zaharias, whose career originates from the beginnings of the AAA—the other original strand of Australian Himalayan mountaineering—has established the longest climbing career in the Himalaya of any Australian mountaineer.

Starting with the AAA's expedition to Ganesh IV in 1981, Zaharias has remained active in the great ranges of Asia to the present day—a period of 29 years. Through this time, he has participated in 15 Himalayan expeditions, has been leader, co-leader or team leader on 10 of them and has climbed five 8000 m peaks. On 25th May 2010 Zaharias reached the summit of Everest from the northern side, adding the world's highest peak and his sixth 8000m peak to his impressive record. It is fitting that the last word goes to Zaharias:

Many professionals, particularly urban professionals, are now choosing to have their first Himalayan experience, and often their first mountaineering experience, with a commercial operator. The national, club or 'mates' expedition is becoming less prevalent but these 'home-grown', self-help affairs arguably immerse the participants more fully into the total Himalayan experience where one needs to deal with all facets of planning, organisation, negotiation and climbing.

Since the start of the new millennium there have been greater levels of Australian climbing in the Himalayas, with a distinct focus on the 8000 metre peaks. This focus on trade or 'sports' routes is perhaps a reflection of the times with greater wealth, easier access to the Himalayas and the need to escape a mundane urban existence driving more Australians into the solitude, tranquillity and sheer challenge of the mountains. Beyond the 8000 metre peaks is a vast, diverse and largely unknown landscape that continues to inspire intrepid climbers who are prepared to go off the beaten track in search of unique and unbridled challenges.⁸

8 Zaharias, 'Top of the world: Australian Himalayan climbing'.

This text is taken from *Himalayan Dreaming: Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia, 1922–1990*, by Will Steffen, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.